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ABSTRACT

This digest is the first in a series of quarterly publications about topics related to educational equity, which will also include reviews of related resources. Its main article examines the adverse lifetime consequences for females of dropping out from school. Women who fail to complete high school are penalized both by their lack of education, which is the fundamental key to employment; and by the still prevalent myth that men are the primary source of income for most families, even though 67 percent of American women work and 60 percent of those working women are either supporting families or are part of households where the husband's yearly earnings are less than $15,000. Women from poor families must overcome an especially difficult set of obstacles to successfully complete school. Despite the advances made in the past 30 years, schools are still primarily oriented towards the white, male student; females are denied teacher attention, socialized to be cooperative rather than aggressive, exposed to low expectations, and not provided pregnancy and childcare services that could increase the chances for young mothers to remain in school. Schools and teachers can help lower the female dropout rate by providing a bias-free educational environment that ensures that females achieve the same level of educational and economic opportunity as males. The second article, "WEEA Materials Key to Dropout Prevention for Girls," reviews seven publications that can be directly applied to the educational needs of females. (FMW)

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WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL EQUITY ACT PUBLISHING CENTER

DIGEST

Education Development Center, Inc.
OERI, U.S. Department of Education

Female dropouts: The challenge

Well over two million American girls and women now between the ages of 14 and 24 are high school dropouts. Girls who drop out before receiving a high school diploma usually do so during adolescence, a period in which young people generally do not consider the long-range consequences of their actions. But dropping out of school has adverse consequences that can last a lifetime. This is especially true for girls, who are less likely than boys to return to school, or obtain a general equivalency diploma, once they have dropped out.[1]

Strong link to work options

Education is a fundamental key to employment in America. As the agricultural and heavy industries that once provided the majority of Americans with jobs have given way to an economy characterized by professional, service, and technical occupations, the jobs available to those without a high school diploma have dwindled. Dropouts have an unemployment rate more than double that of high school graduates and constitute a substantial proportion of the long-term unemployed.

Higher paying jobs generally require a high school diploma, if not postsecondary academic or vocational education. High school dropouts earn, on the average, only 70 percent of what graduates make. Those who drop out before high school earn only 40 percent of what graduates do.[2] And, in a job market where the struggle for women's equity is far from complete, female dropouts suffer a double disadvantage. The average woman still earns only 65 cents for every dollar earned by a man; a female dropout makes, on average, only 50 cents for every dollar earned by a man with the same level of education.[3]

Women who fail to complete high school are penalized both by their lack of education and by the still prevalent myth that men are the primary source of income for most families. The reality is that 67 percent of American women work, making up over half of the civilian labor force. Sixty percent of these women are single, separated, divorced, widowed, or come from households in which the husband's yearly earning is less than $15,000. Half of all mothers work outside the home: 65 percent of mothers with children under 18 and 75 percent of divorced mothers work to support themselves and their children. Fifty-two percent of families at or below the poverty level are headed by women.

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Poverty is prime indicator

Girls from poor families must overcome an especially difficult set of obstacles to successfully complete

The WEEA Publishing Center at Education Development Center is pleased to present this issue of the *WEEA Digest* as the first in a series of quarterly releases. Each digest will contain a brief overview of a particular issue in educational equity and a list of resources developed through WEEA grants that give further information on the subject. During the coming year our digest will cover such topics as women in educational administration and encouraging girls in math and science, and will include information of interest to WEEA grantees and others concerned with educational equity issues. If you know of anyone to add to our mailing list, please let us know!

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school. Poverty is the primary factor associated with dropping out. Minority groups that are disproportionally represented in the lower income brackets, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, have high drop-out rates. The drop-out rate among people of color in urban school districts can be staggering, ranging from 40 to over 60 percent.[4]

Girls who drop out are often faced with a school and social environment that impels them toward noncompletion.

Women of color who drop out of school not only lack the educational prerequisites for many jobs, but also face both gender and racial discrimination.

Dropping out of school is not an arbitrary act. Girls who drop out are often faced with a school and social environment that impels them toward noncompletion. Poverty, and all the disadvantages that poverty entails, is the primary indicator of school noncompletion.

Schools less responsive to females' needs

Despite the advances made in the last thirty years, our schools are still primarily oriented toward the white, male student. Research indicates that schools, and teachers (both male and female), are still more responsive to boys, their learning styles, their needs, and their futures, than they are to female students. The myth that educational achievement is more important for boys (because they will become the primary breadwinners in families) often causes teachers to place male educational needs above those of their female students. Research has demonstrated that "attention is directly correlated to achievement." That is, students to whom teachers pay more attention consistently do better. Research also demonstrates that teachers, regardless of sex, generally pay less attention to girl students than to boys.[5]

In America, and in American schools, girls are socialized to be cooperative, boys to be assertive. Girls tend to be penalized for assertive behavior (such as calling out answers in class without raising their hands) for which boys are rewarded.[6] Whatever the merits of cooperation (and there are many), schools and workplaces generally reward just that kind of assertiveness that girls are taught to avoid. Such practices restrict girls' abilities to achieve in school and promote the internalization of a passivity that adversely affects their opportunities for both academic and vocational advancement.

Teachers and other school staff—both consciously and unconsciously—often expect more from boys, and teach in ways that turn these expectations into self-fulfilling prophecies. Through explicit and subtle behaviors, they often reinforce the myth that women do not do well in mathematics and science, reinforcing math and science anxiety among their female pupils and contributing to failure in these subjects. When internalized by girl students, these expectations lower self-esteem and create a sense of "learned helplessness" that can contribute to academic failure and dropout.

The relationship between teenage pregnancy and school noncompletion is still being debated. We know that dropout and teenage pregnancy are associated with many of the same risk factors, including poverty, low self-esteem, and the educational attainment of a girl's parents. We also know that 40 percent of female dropouts do so during a pregnancy and that 50 percent of teenage pregnancies occur to dropouts. Although there is no hard evidence on this question, it would seem reasonable to assume that the provision of appropriate services, including childcare, for pregnant teenagers and young mothers, will increase their chances of remaining in school.

"Attention is directly correlated to achievement." . . . Teachers, regardless of sex, generally pay less attention to girl students than to boys.

Institutional change needed

There are many other things that schools and teachers can do to lower the drop-out rate among girls. As one researcher wrote, "While schools cannot change the social or economic backgrounds of students, they do have choices regarding the official response to school-based factors associated with dropping out."[7] While many of these strategies (such as the provision of bilingual education programs, remedial education and special tutoring, and self-esteem enhancement programs) are beneficial for both male and female students, schools must ensure that gender-appropriate dropout prevention activities exist to combat those gender-specific obstacles that girls must overcome to complete their high school education.

The continued existence of gender discrimination within the educational system demands an institutional response. Administrators, teachers, and counselors must be made aware of research about the causes and consequences of female dropout. An essential component of any cohesive attempt to reduce the drop-out rate among girls is the provision of a bias-free academic environment to ensure that girls achieve the same level of educational and economic opportunity as do their male counterparts. Training teachers, counselors, and administrators to identify and correct those attitudes and practices that unfairly penalize their female students is an important step toward both sex equity in education and the reduction of dropout among girls.

Marc Posner
Education Development Center

Notes

[1] J. Earle, *Female Dropouts: A New Perspective*. Newton, Mass.: WEEA Publishing Center/EDC, 1989.
[2] A. Pallas, *School Dropouts in the United States*. Issue paper. Washington, D.C.: Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, 1987.
[3] *Women in the Workforce*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 1987.
[4] *Racial and Ethnic High School Dropout Rate in NYC*. Summary report. New York: Aspira of New York, 1983; C. Kyle, J. Lane, J. Sween, and A. Triana, *We Have a Choice: Students at Risk of Leaving Chicago Public Schools*. Chicago: DePaul University, Chicago Area Studies Center, Center for Research on Hispanics, March 1986.
[5] D. Grayson and M. Martin, *Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement*. Earlham, Ia.: GrayMill Foundation, 1988.
[6] M. Sadker and D. Sadker, "Sexism in the Classroom from Grade School to Graduate School." *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1986: 512–15.
[7] A. Wheelock, "Dropping Out: What the Research Says." *Equity and Choice*, Fall 1986: 7–11.

WEEA materials key to dropout prevention for girls

Female dropouts often tend to be invisible. In schools structured to meet the needs of male students or to address the issues raised by male dropouts, the special needs of females at risk are often overlooked or unrecognized. But, once those factors that affect at-risk girls are recognized, appropriate measures can be taken to reduce their drop-out/push-out rate. It is issues such as these that WEEA projects attempt to address. As the only program currently funded by the U.S. Department of Education to create model programs that increase education options for women and girls, the WEEA Program has been instrumental in developing a body of resources that are directly applicable to the needs of at-risk females.

For instance, *Female Dropouts: A New Perspective* is the first examination of the special issues that affect at-risk females. The research for this project was funded by a 1986 grant to the National Association of State Boards of Education. Not only does this book raise the discussion of girls' needs to national attention, it offers valuable and practical recommendations for programs that deal with girls at risk. In her book, Dr. Janice Earle identifies five factors most like to keep young women in school: academic encouragement, activities to enhance self-esteem, coordination of services for academic and nonacademic needs, bias-free interactions with teachers and administrators, and encouragement to consider or enroll in nontraditional careers.

Using Earle's five success factors as guides, WEEA materials can be utilized by systems seeking to effectively address the issue of female dropouts. All WEEA materials are gender-fair and designed to reduce sex-role stereotyping in all aspects of education. Each product incorporates a bias-free methodology that enhances both female participation in classes and encourages new behaviors on the part of teachers.

Earle and others have pointed out that teacher expectation plays a primary role in student success. Since its development with the help of a WEEA grant, the Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement (GESA) Program has been successfully raising teacher awareness and encouraging new, positive, gender- and race-fair classroom teaching in thousands of sites across the country. As developers Dolores Grayson and Mary Martin have explained, GESA is carefully designed to help teachers make constructive changes in the way they interact with students and, in so doing, to free themselves from stereotypic race and gender role expectations. GESA independent evaluations have shown the positive impact of equity on educational excellence and the implication for at-risk females. For instance, students in classes taught by teachers participating in GESA achieved a mean gain of 2.1 percent in reading and 7.0 percent in math as assessed by the California Test of Basic Skills.

As part of academic encouragement, Earle recommends that instructional strategies incorporate the group activities and collaboration that complement female cognitive development, such as cooperative learning or specialized attention. Curriculum models that focus on the special needs and interests of females are particularly important.

An example of this occurs within math classes around the country on a daily basis. While our society touts the importance of mathematics for all students, there is still a general feeling in school and in many homes that math and science are "male" classes. Math and science classes are often structured in ways that make mathematics less appealing to girls. For instance, a WEEA-funded report by PEER shows that in many schools computer competency is expected of males and classes are designed to further that. The report quotes a Bank Street College finding that boys get more status for being good at the computer.

"It's the intellectual equivalent of football," stated the research. "These data simply confirm the persistence of sex stereotyped expectations and biased assumptions that discourage girls, both subtly and overtly, from aggressive participation in both computer education and games."

In a new WEEA curriculum, *Add-Ventures for Girls: Building Math Confidence*, Dr. Margaret Franklin uses "fun," hands-on activities to make math exciting for middle school girls. Activities and information on teacher-student interaction patterns, girls' learning styles, and the importance of parent involvement help teachers create an environment that makes math work for girls just at the time when traditional curricula often work to deflate girls' math interests.

A gender-fair approach to science education is also available through another new publication, *Science EQUALS Success*. The book, developed and field-tested by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System, in collaboration with the University of North Carolina and the Charlotte Science Museums, contains over thirty "hands-on," discovery-oriented science activities designed especially for girls and students of color in grades 4–9. Built on the nationally acclaimed EQUALS Program, the curriculum incorporates four basic strategies—cooperative learning, problem solving, spatial skills, and career awareness— into an exciting exploration of science that reduces the stereotyped perception of who can do well in science.

Beyond curriculum changes, it is the personal one-on-one contacts that often make the difference in whether or not a girl remains in school. Mentoring—now one of the most talked about processes to engage students in remaining in school—can be either a wonderful experience of affirmation and discovery, or a disaster. Often the difference between success and failure is the training mentors receive and the structure of the mentoring program itself. As the Mentor Train-

ing Project in Portland, Oregon, showed in its WEEA project, providing training and materials for mentors is the key to a successful program. The project, which trained minority career women to be effective mentors for minority high school girls, developed *Hand in Hand: Mentoring Young Women*, one of the first products available nationally that deals with the specific mentoring needs of minority girls, girls who are often most at risk of early leaving.

And, as the soon-to-be-released *Seek Out Success* documents, it is the personal contact and expectation of teachers that can make the difference. Developed as a successful dropout prevention program in the San Diego Schools, this 18-week guide helps schools establish a successful dropout prevention program by targeting at-risk students—especially girls and students of color—for an intensive experiential program that builds self-esteem and academic skills.

WEEA products go a long way toward meeting the need for resources that help create programs which effectively respond to female students' needs. Below are a range of publications developed with funds from the Women's Educational Equity Act Program, available through the WEEA Publishing Center. Materials may be purchased by mailing a check or money order for the amount of the order (plus $2 shipping for orders under $25; $4 for orders over $25) to the WEEA Publishing Center. To order by phone, using MasterCard, Visa, or purchase orders, or for information on additional resources available through the WEEA Publishing Center, call 1-800-225-3088 (in Massachusetts: 617-969-7100).

Female Dropouts: A New Perspective, by Janice Earle, National Association of State Boards of Education
This ground-breaking study critically examines the problem of girls who drop out of school and describes those factors that place certain girls at risk. Our updated version includes recommendations for action and describes model programs around the country. ***(#2700 $6.75)***

Seek Out Success, by the San Diego City Schools
Available this winter, this intensive 18-week curriculum is designed to ensure student retention and graduation from high school. Especially responsive to the needs of females and students of color, this model program focuses on enrichment and hands-on, cooperative group learning, emphasizing a sense of belonging and parent involvement. ***(#2713 $32.00)***

Hand in Hand: Mentoring Young Women, by the Center for Sex Equity, Portland, Oregon
This three-volume set is one of the first step-by-step guides to training career women of color to be effective mentors for high school girls. Contains a complete guide to developing and implementing a mentoring program, a mentor guide that serves as the basis for workshop activities, and a student journal. ***(#2685 planning guide $17.50; #2686 mentor guide $8.50; #2687 student journal $10.75)***

Add-Ventures for Girls: Building Math Confidence, by Margaret Franklin, University of Nevada
A unique, field-tested guide that uses "fun," hands-on activities to introduce elementary or middle school girls to the exciting world of math. Both versions use real-world problems and discussion about role models to help girls develop realistic expectations for math learning and careers. ***(#2709 elementary guide $25.00; #2710 middle school guide $28.00)***

Science EQUALS Success, by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System
This discovery-oriented program opens up the world of science for girls and students of color in grades 4 to 9. Building on the nationally acclaimed EQUALS Program, these supplementary activities include cooperative learning, problem solving, spatial skills, and career awareness. ***(#2711 $16.00)***

Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement (GESA), by Dolores A. Grayson and Mary D. Martin
A carefully designed program to help teachers make constructive changes in the way they interact with students and, in so doing, to free themselves from stereotypical race and gender role expectations. Information on training and materials available by contacting GrayMill Foundation, Rt. 1, Box 45, Earlham, IA 50072, 515-834-2431.

The Neuter Computer: Computers for Girls and Boys, by Jo Schuchat Sanders and Antonia Stone
An innovative approach to gender-fair computer education that makes learning fun while it reduces sex-role stereotyping for both girls and boys, as well as for their teachers. Available from the Women's Action Alliance, 370 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017, 212-532-8330.

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